

# **Blessings and Curses in the Bible: The Case of the Book of Job**

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## **Introduction**

Human suffering remains an evergreen problem in the history of humanity. A question which is often raised in this regard is, “why is there suffering in the world if a good God manages it?” Moreover, how is it that often the innocent suffer while the wicked prosper? Following the teachings of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut 7:6-14; 28:1-28) the ancient Israelites responded to the questions. There was no clear notion of an after-life in the Hebrew thought at the earlier stages of their history. Consequently, if God was good and just, any reward for good or punishment for evil had to happen in this life. Retribution was seen totally in earthly perspective.

The general notion was that God blesses the upright. However, if any one suffered, that means that the person has sinned. Suffering was considered as punishment and curse from God for the sins committed. Our task in this presentation is to survey how the book of Job marks a watershed in the process of rethinking the problem (cf. Ezek 18:2; Jer 31:29; Mal 2:17). The paper shows how the book of Job poses the problem of blessings and curses, discusses it, and rejects the traditional answers of Hebrew thinking/theology. Although Job, the main character of the book, rejects the conventional view, yet after protesting and cursing, he waits in faith! Many people, especially Christians, struggle in the darkness of faith, and the event of Jesus Christ has revealed that suffering is not necessarily a curse or retribution for sin on earth, but a sacrifice to redeem the earth from the destructive powers of sin.

The presentation is in four sections. The first section makes preliminary considerations offering a general view of the terms blessings and curses in the OT and the book of Job. This is followed by a structure of the book of Job which is very crucial for its understanding. The second section poses the problem. It discourses the dialogue between God and Satan; and presents the speeches of the three friends of Job. The third

section focuses on the rejection of the traditional answers of the Hebrew thinking/theology as presented by Job, Elihu and God. The fourth section surveys the implications for today.

## **Preliminary Considerations**

### ***General View of Blessings and Curses in the OT and in Job***

Blessings and curses are opposite realities. Reading through the Scriptures, especially the OT, one finds a lot of passages referring to these realities. The word “blessing” is translated from Hebrew *berakah*; it is conceived as a communication of life from God. The loyal Israelite had a profound sense of dependence upon God as the source of all blessings. A customary greeting was a prayer to God for blessing (Gen 24:31; Ruth 2:4). Hence, the common verb for “to bless”, *berak*, often meant “to greet” (cf. Gen 47:7, 10; 1 Sam 13:10).<sup>1</sup> In addition, blessing is both internal and external, the inner power of the soul and the good fortune that produces that power. It is the power of fruitfulness in a wider sense of fertility in the family, in farming, in raising cattle and sheep. Therefore, it is the positive vital power, which for the people of Israel is manifest above all in fertility.<sup>2</sup>

Besides, blessing is related to wisdom as the power to accomplish, to succeed in life. It means having vital power in its deepest and most comprehensive sense. This is the reason why it includes the material as well as the spiritual. But first and foremost, it is life, health, and fertility for the people, their cattle, their fields, etc.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, any kind of suffering, such as sickness, infertility, poverty, etc., were perceived in Israel as curses from God. The English word “curse” is rendered by the Hebrew words *arar*, *qalal* and *alah* corresponding to the Greek *kataraoimai*, *katara* and *epikataratos*, and the Hebrew *ḥatam* and *ḥerem*,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. V. Morris, “Blessing in the Bible”, in Thomas Carson and Joann Cerrito (eds.), *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Second Edition, Vol. 2 Baa–Cam (Washington: Gale, 2003), 437.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 20.

which correspond to the Greek *anathematizo* and *anathema*.<sup>4</sup> In Israel, people had in mind that curses were sent to the wicked people, those who have sinned. Also, a person could utter a curse, desiring another's hurt (Job 31:30; Gen 12:3).

In the book of Job therefore, both the concepts of curse and blessing are used: the latter appears once (29:13), while the verb "to bless" is used four times (1:10; 1:21; 3:20; 42:12). The author of this book utilizes the word "curse" once as a noun (31:30) and nine times as a verb (1:5; 1:11; 2:5; 2:9; 3:1; 3:8 [two times]; 5:3; 24:18). Hence, in the book of Job, the concepts of "blessing" and "curse" are the foundation of traditional Hebrew thought known also as retribution theology.

### ***Structure of the Book***<sup>5</sup>

The structure of the book is essential for understanding it. Job 1:1-2:13; 42:7-17 are the Prologue and Epilogue respectively. They contain his trial and restoration and form the framework to the book. Job 3-31 is a poetic Dialogue. It deals with the profound theological problem of the meaning of suffering in the life of a just man. Rather than being a report of a literal debate, it is a literary creation. Job defends his integrity against the charges of his three friends who think in the traditional way. They believe that they are defending God. In chapters 29-31 he closes out the debate with a formal protestation of his innocence and issues a challenge to God. In chapters 32-37 there is a sudden appearance of a fourth adversary, Elihu, who challenges Job's friends and Job and suggests that they submit to the divine majesty and divine control of human events. In 38-41 God himself appears and recites the power and marvels beyond human understanding that shows Job's demand for justice to be arrogant and unfounded. Job submits twice. In 42:1-6, there is a presentation of the final reaction of Job, 42:7-17 is the final act of the story in which God restores Job to his greatness and attacks his friends for accusing him.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leland Ryken et al. (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 186.

<sup>5</sup> A.I. Acha, "Human Suffering in the Book of Job and Its Implications for Culture and Human Development," *Koinonia*, vol. 5 (2011), 103-104.

The book of Job has a fairly simple structure. Job 1 and 2 are the prologue, written in prose. Job 3:1-42:6 is poetry that consists of a cycle of speeches between Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar and later Elihu, and then the dialogue between Yahweh and Job. Job 42:7-17 is the epilogue, which is written in prose.<sup>6</sup> The dialogues of chapters 3-31 are, in general, a cycle of speeches between Job, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The third cycle does not follow the pattern of the first two cycles. Zophar does not give a speech and Bildad's speech is significantly shorter than his previous speeches.

## **Posing and Discussing the Problem**

### ***Discourse between God and Satan***

The book of Job described Job as an exemplary character, a man who was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil. He had a large family, was wealthy, and God blessed him with an abundance of material possessions. He likewise had a good reputation and was the greatest man of the East (cf. Job 1:1-3). The Lord himself used remarkable words when he spoke about him to Satan: "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil" (Job 1:8). Here, God calls him his servant. According to John E. Hartley, "with this title, Yahweh was acknowledging that Job was a faithful, obedient follower".<sup>7</sup> Thus, God praises Job in his conversation with Satan as one who lived an exemplary life.

Eventually, Satan challenged God as regards Job's character: "Does Job fear God for nothing?" (Job 1:9). For scholars, this passage constitutes the key question for the whole book. It introduces the traditional Hebrew thought whereby "God is seen as the One who punishes the wicked, as well as the One who brings good and rewards the righteous".<sup>8</sup> Commenting on the same verse (Job 1:9), Hartley mentions that the

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in its Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009), 381.

<sup>7</sup> John E. Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 73.

<sup>8</sup> Larry J. Waters, "Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job", in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (October–December 1997), 436–51, here 441 on footnote no. 25.

question insinuated that all good deeds spring from selfish motives. To Satan, this would surely be true in Job's case, for God had both protected him from all harm and blessed him abundantly, God had planted a fence of thorn bushes around all that Job owned so that no plague or misfortune could harm his huge herds and productive fields. Yahweh, likewise, had so blessed Job that his flocks had multiplied at such a rapid rate that they *spread out* (Hebrew *paras*) over the entire land. Given these facts, how could one believe that Job served God freely out of love?<sup>9</sup>

Satan instigated a challenge to examine and disclose how genuine Job's faith was. With God's permission then, he surprised Job with a succession of attacks that devastated his family and estate; and brought him indescribable personal misery. All these were for Job to start cursing God, but in vain. According to J. P. Fokkelman, "the test which the prosecutor wanted to carry out and which was allowed him by the deity, seems for the time being to be a monumental failure: Job does not curse God".<sup>10</sup> Hence, Job was able to show that his righteousness was founded on his personal intimate relationship with God based on disinterested love. Satan has then failed with his thought that Job fears God because he has been blessed abundantly.

### **The Three Friends of Job**

After Satan has left, his thought was perpetuated by Job's three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar) who came to offer him sympathy and consolation. These men, each in his own way, reasoned according to the traditional Hebrew wisdom "that since God is in control of the world and because He is just, the only way wise people can maintain faith in Him is to see all blessing as evidence of goodness and righteousness and all suffering as evidence of unrighteousness and sin".<sup>11</sup> For them, Job's suffering was deserved; only the wicked and evil doers suffer. Job was suffering; therefore, Job was wicked and evil. This was expressed in

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<sup>9</sup> Hartley, *The Book of Job*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> Jan P. Fokkelman, *The Book of Job in Form: A Literary Translation with Commentary* (Boston: Leiden, 2012), 200.

<sup>11</sup> Waters, "Reflections on Suffering from the Book of Job", 442.

many of their interventions as found in 4:8; 11:6, 11; 18:5-21; 20:25-29; 22:2-11, 21-30.

### ***Eliphaz's Intervention***<sup>12</sup>

After Job lamented his birth (chap 3), Eliphaz began the three cycles of debate (chaps. 4-31). His speeches are recorded in chapters 4-5, 15, and 22. Eliphaz's questions immediately revealed his theology, "whoever perished being innocent? Or where were the upright destroyed?" (4:7). However, experience and history, Job said, show that many innocent persons have suffered (24:1-12). He himself, he said, is an example. Yet based on a wrong premise Eliphaz sought to convict Job of his "foolish" response to misfortune and to urge him to lay his sin before God (5:8; 15:20-35; 22:5-12). His basic message was that Job must have sinned, the consequence of which is his suffering (4:12-5:16; 15:2-5, 20-35; 22:5-15). Without the benefit of knowing the unseen events of chapter 1, Eliphaz saw God as both the initiator and reliever of suffering (Job 5:18). Therefore, Eliphaz wanted Job to see that God's oppression resulted from the patriarch's many presumed sins (15:11-16, 20; 22:5-11). Once Job admitted his sin, God would heal him, and his prosperity would return (22:21).

### ***Bildad's Intervention***<sup>13</sup>

When Job said to his friends: "If I have sinned, show me" (6:24; cf. 7:20-21), Bildad took up the challenge (chaps. 8, 18, 25), and in his first speech he appealed to traditional wisdom "inquire of past generations, and consider the things searched out by their fathers" (8:8). Bildad correctly asserted that God is not unjust or unfair (8:2-3). But he was wrong in saying that Job was totally at fault and needed to repent before he could be restored (8:4-7). God would be unfair to allow undeserved suffering to come to a righteous man. Job's insistence on his innocence was an affront to the justice and rightness of God (8:3, 20). Bildad frankly told Job he was evil and that he must repent so that God could bring back his laughter, joy, and peace (8:21-22, a cruel reminder of Job's losses). According to Bildad, Job was suffering because of sin; and

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<sup>12</sup>Acha, "Human Suffering in the Book of Job", 104-105.

<sup>13</sup>Acha, "Human Suffering in the Book of Job", 105.

according to the principle of retribution/recompense, Job deserved to be punished. Because Job refused to accept this principle, Bildad supposed the patriarch did not know God and had been rejected by him (8:4; 18:5-21). How could Job claim to be righteous when the evidence against him was so strong (25:4-6)?

### ***Zophar's Intervention***<sup>14</sup>

Zophar continued the attack on Job's righteousness and integrity (11:2-4), fear of God (vv. 5-6), and morality (vv. 6,14). Claiming to have a superior understanding of God and his wisdom, Zophar said Job was too superficial to understand the deeper things of God (vv. 7-12). This third friend stated that God had even overlooked some of Job's sins (v. 6). While Job admitted that God was the source of his suffering (12:14-25), he insisted that he had committed no sin commensurate with his suffering (chap. 31).<sup>15</sup> There is no doubt that God's wisdom, as Zophar said, is unfathomable (11:7-9); however, this was not the issue in Job's situation. Satan's original faulty premise was repeated by Zophar: If Job was good, he would prosper; but since he suffers, he must be evil and will die (vv. 13-20). Zophar accused Job of wickedness (20:6), pride (v. 6), perishing like dung (v.7), and oppressing the poor (v. 19). Like the other two antagonists, Zophar spoke of the wicked person's loss of prosperity (vv. 15, 18, 20-22). He hoped this would establish the premise of traditional wisdom and eventually lead Job to repent.

### ***Summary***

The three counsellors intensified their pressure on Job to accept the traditional doctrine of retribution/recompense, thus inflicting greater mental suffering on Job.<sup>16</sup> Acting unknowingly as agents of Satan's philosophy, the three friends increased the suffering of an already hurting man. However, even though Job found inconsistencies with the application of the doctrine, he shared the view of the friends that the

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<sup>14</sup>Acha, "Human Suffering in the Book of Job", 105.

<sup>15</sup> For a good discussion of Job 31, see Pipes, "Christian Response to Human Suffering", 1-18.

<sup>16</sup> L.D. Johnson, *Out of the Whirlwind: The Major Message of Job* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 30-60.

world is based on a reward and punishment scheme.<sup>17</sup> This position only added to his frustration. Job's irritation at the arguments of these three advisers (and at God) can be seen in these paraphrased responses: "When will your arguments end" (6:14-17)? "What have I done to deserve this" (6:24)? "God, just forgive me and get it over with" (7:21). "No matter what I do, nothing changes" (chap. 9). "Why will you not answer me, God" (10:1-7)? "I cannot take any more of this" (14:18-22)! "Nobody cares about me" (19:13-22)! "Where can I get some answers" (28:12)? "Everything used to be so perfect" (chap. 29). "What good is it to serve God" (chap. 30)?<sup>18</sup>

### **Rejection of the Traditional Answers of Hebrew Thinking/Theology (Job, Elihu, God)**

#### ***Job's Rejection***

The book of Job marks a watershed in the process of rethinking the problem (cf. Ezek 18:2; Jer 31:29; Mal 2:17). Confident of his own innocence, Job maintains that his suffering is unjustified as he has not sinned, and that there is no reason for God to punish him thus. However, he does not curse God's name but rather seeks an explanation or an account of his wrongdoing. Soon after his first calamities, Job worshiped God, saying "the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away blessed be the name of the Lord" (1:21). He "did not sin nor did he blame God" (v. 22). But later, under the pressure of his opponents' accusations and under the weight of his seemingly endless physical and emotional plight, Job said, "for he bruises me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause" (9:17). In his despair, Job accused God of being unfair and unjust (vv. 17-20), since he observed that God punishes good people and rewards bad people (vv. 21-24). God does not fit the preconceived claims of traditional wisdom, so as Job became despondent over the brevity of life (vv. 25-26), he sensed that God would never forgive him (vv. 27-31), and he pleaded for a mediator (vv. 32-33). Giving up on that possibility, Job asked God to diminish his suffering so that he could meet God in

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<sup>17</sup> M. Tsevat, "The Meaning of the- Book of Job", *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 37 (1996), 97.

<sup>18</sup> M.R. Littleton, *When God Seems Far Away: Biblical Insight for Common Depression* (Wheaton, IL: Shaw 1987), 53-61.

court and plead his own case (vv. 34-35). Even though Job saw great inconsistencies in the application of the retribution/recompense doctrine by the three antagonists (24:1-12),<sup>19</sup> he concluded that God did not really care for him and that he was caught in some sort of divine entrapment in which God's loving kindness was absent (10:1-13, 16-17). He lamented his birth (vv. 18-19) and his coming death (vv. 20-22). Captured by false counsel and confused by God's ways, Job was now ready for a true counsellor.

### ***Elihu's Discourse***

Elihu began his discourses with a lengthy introduction and expression of anger toward both Job and the three older companions (32:1-10).<sup>20</sup> He felt that both parties had been guilty of perverting divine justice and of misrepresenting God (32:2-3, 11-22). Elihu attempted to correct the friends' and Job's faulty image of God. Elihu affirmed that God was not silent during Job's suffering (33:14-30). He argued that God is not unjust (34:10-12, 21-28). Furthermore, God is neither uncaring (35:15), nor is he powerless to act on behalf of his people (chaps. 36-37). Elihu presented a totally different perspective on suffering from that of the three. He said Job's suffering was not because of past sin, but was designed to keep him from continuing to accept a sinful premise for suffering, to draw him closer to God, to teach him that God is absolutely in control of the affairs of life, and to show him that God does reward the righteous, but only on the basis of his love and grace.<sup>21</sup> It was as if Elihu was saying, "you insist on justice and righteousness, but do you really want to be treated justly? Have you really considered what would happen if God took you at your word?"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> The fact that God postpones judgment disproves the theory of the three friends concerning immediate retribution for wrongdoing. "Job is no more out of God's favour as one of the victims than the criminal in vv. 13-17 is in God's favour because of God's inaction". Cf. K. Barker (ed.), *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1985), 759.

<sup>20</sup> Like the reader, Elihu was dismayed, worn down, and tired of the dialogues which had solved nothing. Many have criticized Elihu's lengthy introduction, but both protocol (his youth against the age of the others), local custom, and his exasperation were justly expressed.

<sup>21</sup> Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, 220.

<sup>22</sup> W. L. Michel, "Job's Real Friend: Elihu", *Criterion* 21 (1982) 31.

One cannot have a relationship with God as long as one thinks that there is something in oneself which makes one deserves God's friendship or, a genuine relationship with another human being on such terms. God never withdraws from the just, no matter what, no matter how deep the frustration, the bitterness, the darkness, the confusion, the pain.<sup>23</sup> Elihu identified himself with Job. He was a fellow sufferer, not an observer (33:6).<sup>24</sup> He helped Job realize that a relationship with God is not founded on nor maintained by his insistence on loyalty, purity or righteousness; but is wholly of God's grace. Elihu did not see the primary basis of Job's suffering as sin, though he did not minimize Job's move toward sin in the dialogue (e.g., 34:36-37; 35:16). Among other things suffering, Elihu said, was a preventive measure to keep Job from perpetuating a sinful, false theology. God's sovereign control and freedom of action over the affairs of Job's life were not restricted by a theological system of retribution/recompense but were acts of grace and mercy. God therefore rewards the righteous in grace, not because "of some human action seeking a deserved response."<sup>25</sup>

Elihu takes a mediator's path — he attempts to maintain the sovereignty, righteousness and gracious mercy of God. His speech comes after the final words of Job in the third speech cycle (31:40) and goes from chapters 32-37.<sup>26</sup> Elihu strongly condemns the approach taken by the three friends and argues that Job is misrepresenting God's righteousness and discrediting his loving character. He spoke last because he is much younger than the other three friend; but says that age makes no difference when it comes to insights and wisdom. He argues for God's power, redemptive salvation, and absolute rightness in all he does. God is

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<sup>23</sup> W. L. Michel, "Job's Real Friend," 31.

<sup>24</sup> "Elihu appeared on the scene.... He confesses that he, too, is involved. He admits that Job's problem is humanity's problem and he realizes that Job's question is basically the same as his own. In contrast to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who rejected Job, Elihu identifies with him and speaks to him out of inner solidarity", Cf. H. J. M. Nouwen, "Living the Questions: The Spirituality of the Religion Teacher", *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 32 (1976), 21. Also see Marvin Tate, "The Speeches of Elihu", *Review & Expositor* 68 (1971), 490; and Gordis, "Elihu the Intruder", 62-63.

<sup>25</sup> Lawson, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, 220.

<sup>26</sup> These chapters are considered as a later addition to the book. Cf. Roland E. Murphy, *The Book of Job: A Short Reading* (New York/Mahwah New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999), 87.

mighty, yet just, and quick to warn and to forgive. Elihu's speeches act as a narrative bridge which joins Job's summary of his case with the appearance of God. His speech maintains that Job, while righteous, is not perfect. The *quid pro quo* premise was contested by Elihu and shown to be without substance. He prepared Job for God's response to the debates and Job's ultimate submission to God's sovereignty.

### ***God's Response***

According to Childs, "Elihu's speeches function hermeneutically to shape the reader's hearing of divine speeches. They shift the theological attention from Job's question of justice to divine omnipotence and thus offer a substantive perspective on suffering, creation, and the nature of wisdom itself".<sup>27</sup> Elihu brought "perspective, clarity, empathy, compassion and concrete help",<sup>28</sup> thereby preparing Job for God's words. It should be noted that he is the only Israelite in the group.<sup>29</sup> After Elihu's speech, God appears and referring to Job says: "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge" (38:2; as Elihu had said twice [34:35; 35:16])? God did not address Job's suffering directly during this discourse, nor did he answer Job's attacks on his justice.

God spoke of his sovereignty and omnipotence as demonstrated in the creation of the earth, the sea, the sun, the underworld, light and darkness, the weather, and the heavenly bodies (38:4-38). Animate creation testifies of God's sovereignty and providential compassion: the lion (vv. 39-40), the raven (v.41), the mountain goat and the deer (39:1-4), the donkey (39:5-8), the ox (39:9-12), the ostrich (39:13-18), the horse (39:19-25), the hawk (39:26), and the eagle or vulture (39:27-30). Then He said to Job: "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it" (40:2). Of course, Job could not respond to God's remarks (40:3-5). The storm motif continued in the second speech (40:6). Job 40:8-14 presents the power of God versus humans. God affirmed his justice without defending or explaining it. God said, in essence, that he is and always will be just and fair to his creatures. God

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<sup>27</sup> B. Childs, *Introduction to Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, Fortress 1979), 541.

<sup>28</sup> Michel, "Job's Real Friend: Elihu", 32.

<sup>29</sup> Murphy, *The Book of Job: A Short Reading*, 87.

alone – not Job, nor the three friends, and certainly not Satan – administers and regulates justice.

“The ode to the behemoth” follows, in which God’s own wisdom stresses his power in opposition to that of human or Satan (40: 15-24). The second poem (chap. 41), “the ode to the leviathan”, represents the same essential principles. What the behemoth and the leviathan represent are contested in scholarly circles, but the message is clear: since human being has no power over these creatures, he can find strength and power only in God. God is sovereign, omnipotent, just, loving, and perfectly righteous.<sup>30</sup> God did not tell Job to repent so that his pain would be explained, or that he would be vindicated, or that his prosperity would be restored. Instead, God brought Job to a face-to-face meeting with himself.

Perhaps the first thing Job discovered concerned the mistaken reason for his quest. The consuming passion for vindication suddenly presented itself as absurd once the courageous rebel stood in God’s presence. Maintaining complete silence on this singular issue brought Job to a true encounter with his creator. God taught Job the error in assuming that the universe operated according to a principle of rationality. Once that putative principle of order collapsed before divine freedom, the need for personal vindication vanished as well, since God’s anger and favour show no positive correspondence with human acts of villainy or virtue. Job’s personal experience had taught him that last bit of information, but he had also clung tenaciously to an assumption of order. Faced with a stark reminder of divine freedom, Job finally gave up this comforting claim, which had hardly brought solace in his case.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Zuck comments, “The behemoth and leviathan have many similarities, so if one is an actual animal, then the other probably is also. As discussed earlier, in the ancient Near East both animals were symbols of chaotic evil...Man cannot subdue single-handedly a hippopotamus or a crocodile, his fellow creatures (40:15). Nor can man conquer evil in the world, which they symbolize. Only God can do that. Therefore, Job’s defiant impugning of God’s ways in the moral universe – as if God were incompetent or even evil-was totally absurd and uncalled for” (cf. Zuck, “Job”, 772-73). Also, see Roy B. Zuck, *Job, Everyman’s Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 180.

<sup>31</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom: An Introduction* (London: SCM, 1982), 124-125.

It is supposed that the divine speech “sweeps away all the irrelevancies and false problems in which the argument with the friends had entangled Job. It puts Job’s problem in a new perspective and opens up a vista in which, though without answer, it ceases to require one”.<sup>32</sup> Then he repented of his misconception of God, not of any alleged sin on which his three friends had focused. The point of God’s speeches, and ultimately the entire book of Job, is to proclaim the absolute freedom of God over his creation.

The traditional Israelite wisdom emphasizes the importance of righteous living. Michael Coogan writes that Job and Ecclesiastes both take positions opposed to the mainstream of the wisdom tradition in the bible, as exemplified in the book of Proverbs.<sup>33</sup> They are part of nonconformist or speculative group of wisdom literature within the OT.<sup>34</sup> It is Job’s response, Elihu’s and God’s speeches that make this book part of the deviant wisdom or “anti-wisdom wisdom”.<sup>35</sup> Job’s friends do not waver from their belief that Job must have sinned to incite God’s punishment. As the speeches progress, Job’s friends increasingly criticized him for refusing to confess his sins, although they themselves are at a loss as to which sin he has committed. They also assumed, in their view of theology, that God always rewards good and punishes evil, with no apparent exceptions allowed. There seems to be no room in their understanding of God for divine discretion and mystery in allowing and arranging suffering for purposes other than retribution. It is worthy of note that Job’s friends never used the name YHWH; they referred to God as El Shaddai, Eloah, and Elohim. The intention of the author of this book is not necessarily to ridicule the traditional doctrine, but to demonstrate that it is inadequate.

In the epilogue, God condemning Job’s friends for their ignorance and lack of understanding while commending Job for his righteous words,

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<sup>32</sup> R. A. F. McKenzie – R.E. Murphy, “Job”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 486.

<sup>33</sup> M. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in its Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 380.

<sup>34</sup> N. Shupak, *Where can Wisdom be Found? The Sage’s Language Bible and in Ancient Egyptian Literature* (Freiburg Switzerland: University Press, 1993), 12.

<sup>35</sup> M. H., Pope, *Job*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Double Day, 1973), LXXIII.

commands them to prepare burnt offerings and reassures them that Job will pray for their forgiveness. Job is restored to health, gaining double the riches he possessed before and having new children, 7 sons and 3 daughters (his wife did not die in this ordeal). His new daughters<sup>36</sup> were the most beautiful in the land and were given inheritance along with their brothers. Job is blessed once again and lives on another 140 years after the ordeal, living to see his children to the fourth generation and died in a peaceful old age.

### Implications for Today

“God’s rhetoric is directed not so much at emphasizing Job’s ignorance as at making him call to mind how much he does know about God’s wisdom, power, and providence”.<sup>37</sup> According to M.V. Fox, “Job teaches that God does punish and recompense, but incompletely. Justice is immensely important to God, but other principles and concerns may override it”.<sup>38</sup> Even when justice fails, humans should remain loyal to God. God “basically wishes to do justice, but he sometimes finds it necessary, for reasons beyond human comprehension, to violate it”.<sup>39</sup>

It is true that if human righteousness is to be pure, as noted by the Satan in Job 1:9-11, and if Job is invariably and fully rewarded for his virtues, his motivation might be the expectation of a payoff rather than unselfish, uncalculating love and fear of God. Hence, the purity of human loyalty is more important to God than the consistency of his own justice.<sup>40</sup> God should be worshiped for love of him and not for what material gain one would gain from him. In like manner, the worship of God should not be motivated by the fear of incurring his curses or punishment.

Some people faithfully pay tithes and attend all kinds of prayer and healing sessions, vigils, tarry nights, based supposedly on the presumption that God will automatically take their sufferings away and instantly provide them all they ask from him in prayer. The effect of this

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<sup>36</sup> *Jemimah,*

*Keziah and*

*Keren-happuch*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Job\\_-\\_cite\\_note-8](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Job_-_cite_note-8)

<sup>37</sup> M. V. Fox, “The Meanings of the Book of Job”, *JBL* 137, no. 1 (2018), 10.

<sup>38</sup> M. V. Fox, “The Meanings of the Book of Job”, *JBL* 137, no. 1 (2018), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Fox, “The Meanings of the Book of Job”, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Fox, “The Meanings of the Book of Job”, 10.

is *quid pro quo* approach to God. Hence, God is not worshipped for love of him but in order to be blessed with material things. This is really an evidence of shallow faith which leads Christians into tricks and exploitations of religious businesses of the day. Illness, poverty and suffering are seen as curse from God. It is believed that faith and righteous life attracts God's blessings and prosperity while bad behaviour attracts his disfavour, evil and calamity are seen as curse. Existential reality proves these assumptions to be incorrect since good, faithful people also suffer evil and misfortune (cf. Job 24:1-12).

Useful insights are offered by the book of Job in this regard. The book of Job begins with the undeserved suffering of the man Job and reflects on the meaning of suffering and God's relationship to the one who suffers unjustly. Job's suffering is heightened by his refusal to deny his own integrity or the integrity of God. The story of Job contradicts the usual wisdom theology of retribution. It punctures the orthodox Jewish belief that suffering was the lot of evil persons who turned their back on Yahweh.<sup>41</sup> Here was one who had lived so righteously and yet he was struck down by unspeakable calamity and multiple family tragedies. Hence suffering is not a curse or punishment from God.

The event of Jesus Christ has revealed that suffering is not necessarily a curse or retribution for sin on earth, but a sacrifice to redeem the earth from the destructive powers of sin. If we participate in his cross, death and suffering, we shall also share in his life. This is because, astoundingly, Christ transformed human frustration, disappointment and death into life.

In the gospel according to John (9:1-3), the traditional belief is reflected in the question of the disciples. It is striking that they did not ask if the man was born blind because of sin. They were certain that it was and hence a curse from God. Thus, the issue is whether they were his own sins or those of his parents before his birth. Jesus corrected them explicitly: he suffers not because of any sins but that "the works of God may be shown forth in him". This was exactly the response that Job eventually got at the end of all his struggles to understand his plight. It is

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<sup>41</sup>Acha, "Human Suffering in the Book of Job", 99-100.

true that there could be link between suffering and punishment for sin, but not all suffering can be seen in that light.<sup>42</sup>

Christianity emphasizes that right attitude to suffering is fundamental to authentic discipleship and Christian life. The Christian life is a life of sacrifice and renunciation. Accepting suffering in the right manner is a *conditio sine qua non* for discipleship (cf. Luke 14:27-33). In uniting one's suffering to that of Christ lies the merit. Sufferings, illness and misfortune well accepted and united to the passion and death of Christ bear both spiritual and material fruits.<sup>43</sup> It is believed that it was during the most difficult times that the saints had their sweetest times with Christ. Therefore, cross and sufferings are not old-fashioned but constitute the core of Christian faith and theology. Suffering cannot be comprehended fully unless seen from the perspective of the cross of Jesus Christ. This implies that suffering has meaning in God's plan. Therefore, one can never discover the real secret of happiness and peace even in the face of great suffering until one is ready to be the same kind of person Jesus was. John Paul II had this to say in this regard: "In the cross of Christ not only is the redemption accomplished through suffering, but also human suffering itself has also been redeemed... Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the redemption".<sup>44</sup>

At difficult moments, it is crucial to remember that the darkest part of the night is the beginning of the dawn and that at the end of every dark tunnel no matter how long there is some light. Rather than lose hope and feel cursed by God, people should be encouraged to face life's mishaps with some degree of optimism. This means that even though the forces of evil might seem at times to have an upper hand over the good, on the long run goodness always triumphs over evil. Accordingly, far from yielding to pessimism and despair, life ought to be faced with hope and optimism. Patience and perseverance are necessary at hard and difficult circumstances.

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris*, (Vatican Casa Editrice Vaticana 1984), no. 12.

<sup>43</sup> A.I. Acha, "Paul and the Cross of Christ: A Theological Evaluation of the Christian Notion of Suffering", *CATHAN: A Search Light on Saint Paul* (Markurdi: Aboki Publishers 2010), 285.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II, *Jesus Son and Saviour: A Catechesis on the Creed* (Boston; Pauline Books and Media 1996), 274.

It becomes very crucial to instruct the faithful on the Christian meaning of illness, suffering and misfortune and the correct attitude to be taken in such situations. Some people have carelessly lost their lives due to misconception and wrong approach to suffering. Instead of seeking for good medical attention when ill, some people resort to prayer and fasting, being convinced that it is caused by demonic attack, ancestral curse or curse from God for sins committed. Some others resort to native doctors. In some cases, rather than seek for the cause of certain misfortune and correct issues that could be corrected humanly to avoid further damage, people remain at the level of attributing every ill to demonic attack or evil spirits, ancestral curse. Basic knowledge concerning life in a modern world is crucial.

There is no need to get discouraged when the road seems dark and cloudy because darkness will give way to light and death will give way to life. At dawn, when the light of day appears, the darkness of night either willingly or reluctantly vanishes. In spite of all darkness, God ultimately triumphs in glory.<sup>45</sup> That is exactly what happens in the spiritual life too. If we participate in his cross, death and suffering, we shall also share in his life. This is because, astoundingly, Christ transformed human frustration, disappointment and death into life. As Christians who are the light of the world, the salt of the earth (cf. Matt 5:13-16) and the leaven of society, there is need to play our roles as responsible citizens and be committed to changing the temporal order for the better. Christians engage in consoling the afflicted, strengthening the weak, enlightening the blind, aiding the poor, and giving love and truth to all. This is thus an incentive and challenges all to be agents of liberation, helping in alleviating human suffering while also liberating those who are still entrapped by the “traditional wisdom” syndrome.

It is important to note that “*the only bad suffering is that from which one did not learn anything*.” Sufferings are learning experiences which lead to greater maturity in life and in faith and consequently to human development. It is only the suffering which is not borne in union with that of Christ which is meaningless. Job remains a paradigm for patient suffering. Through his sufferings and hardships, he eventually learnt the

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<sup>45</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Vatican: Vatican Press 2005), nos. 37-39.

lesson that the traditional wisdom approach to suffering is inadequate. He also realized the need for correct attitude towards suffering which was possible only through personal encounter with God. Rather than seek for vile, unchristian ways of escape sufferings/tribulations of life, Christians are encouraged to follow the footsteps of Christ.

## Conclusion

The question of why the righteous suffer undeservedly cannot be clarified by only one answer. Retributive justice is inadequate to express God's way of dealing with his creatures. God remains a mystery and human beings should continue to relate with him as such. His thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways (cf. Isa 55:8-9). Neither human piety nor sin affects how God administers his plan. He administers that plan by grace. There is need to examine motivation for serving God, especially during times of trial and suffering. Job's attitude of silence (Job 40:4-5) is the correct response of humans in the presence of God who remains a mystery. Humans can neither cage him nor judge him according to human standards. He remains free to act as he wills. The more humans try to understand him, the more he escapes the human grasp of him and his ways. According to St. Augustine, "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*".<sup>46</sup>

God is not to be limited to a preconceived notion of retribution theology. This implies that sin is not always the cause for suffering. Accepting false belief about suffering can cause one to blame and challenge God. A retributive theology distorts God's ways and confines Him to human standards of interpretation. Although people may misunderstand the ways of God and life's problems, having a personal relationship with God is the only way one can know justice. God's wisdom is above human wisdom. His blessings are based solely on grace, not on a traditional, legalistic formula. Suffering can be faced with faith and trust in a loving, gracious God even when there is no immediate satisfying logical or rational reason to do so. God does allow suffering, pain, and even death, if they best serve his purposes. Prosperity theology has no place in God's grace plan. True wisdom challenges the wrong concepts

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<sup>46</sup> It means, "if you understand him, he is not God" *Sermon 52*, 16: *Patrologia Latina* 38, 360.

of traditional wisdom, and, when properly applied by God's people during undeserved suffering, it becomes a living demonstration of God's grace and a believer's faith. Rain falls by the grace of God on both the righteous and wicked (Matt 5:45). Job's prosperity was returned only after all involved understood that all blessing come by God's grace alone, not because of an individual's piety or because of accepting a retribution theology.